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Figure Class Chapter 3

by Chris Walas



Welcome back! In this chapter we'll cover considerations for doing sitting figures; we'll learn how to make and use texture pads and molds; and wonder of wonders, we'll do an engineer and fireman! If that goes well, we may even attempt the impossible, fitting an engineer into the nearly non-existent space in the cab of a Bachmann Annie! The figures we'll be doing follow the same basic techniques as we've used before, so I won't be going into much detail on the aspects we've already covered.

Remember that the figures you make are YOUR figures for YOUR railroad. Take a look at what you've got on your layout and see where a figure might be used to add interest, humor, or merely to draw attention to some of your marvelous model work. We humans are drawn instinctively to one another, even if one of us happens to be 3" tall. Use your figures as pointers on your layout to get visitors to look at what you want them to look at. If three figures are standing all looking at something, people will automatically look to see what they're looking at. Just like real life.

Having said that, the figures we will be doing this chapter are for the most part "life-givers". They add life to the railroad simply by them being there. An empty locomotive is a cold locomotive. When an

engineer leans out the window, suddenly that engine is alive and ready to move. Look at your trains and buildings and see where you most need to add life. It doesn't take much. A pair of figures here, a lone hobo there and soon the layout comes to life. A house is just a building, but when a family moves in, it becomes a home.

The Sitting Figure



Every garden railroad needs sitting people, and I don't mean the operators! The sight of empty coaches, empty benches, and empty cabs looks...empty. People riding cars, waiting at stations, eating in restaurants, engineers, well... all kinds of sitting figures really, help to fill in the little world of a garden railroad. That's the reason so many manufacturers make sitting figures. And even with the variety they make, it's not nearly enough for most people. The figures I'll be doing in this chapter are for illustration; I don't expect you to try to do copies. This chapter is about considerations for fitting figures where you need them. The first figures we did were standing figures. The only fitting concerns were the contact points of their two feet. A basic fitting figure has at least three contact points; two feet and a rear end. In a seat with a back, add a fourth contact point for the back. If that same seat has armrests and your figure is taking advantage of them, add two more contact points. Add another if your figure is asleep and his head is resting on the top of the seat. That's seven points of contact your figure has with the seat it's sitting in.

What happens if these contacts points don't make contact (or at least suggest that they do)? The figure looks like it's levitating, magically floating out of the chair! Plainly, it's not as convincing as a figure

that looks comfortably settled into the seat. That's the real trick of doing seated figures that look good; making them appear to fit the seat they are in. How do we do this? By taking advantage of the form of the seat wherever we can. And by varying the sitting pose to fit the mood of the setting. Figures for excursion cars should be having lively conversations, gazing at the sights, and in general look like they're having a good experience. Figures for a commuter train should be nodding off, reading the paper or downing their first coffee or martini of the day. Every setting, every era, has it's own opportunities to make figures unique. Think about who the passengers are on your railroad, why they're there, where they're going.

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The figures I'm doing for this section are for my Rogue County excursion train. Sightseers. I've filled two of the four cars I have and now I'll do figures for a third. As we haven't covered women and children yet, this will be the "guys" car. It looks like this.



One of the most important considerations we have when making sitting figures is knowing where they will be sitting. It does us no good to put all the effort into making sitting figures if they're not going to fit the seat! Making our own seated figures gives us the opportunity to fit the figure to the seat and make it look like it belongs there. So the seat is our first concern.

The seat in this car is simple enough, just a bench. So the main contact points on these figures will be the feet and rear ends. We'll add other contact points on some for variety. As you can see, what I've done is to form some aluminum foil to the same level as the bench, in essence I've made a single box seat the same height as the bench. I've done this because sitting figures need to be checked every step of the way. This bench is wood and polyclay tends



to stick to wood. Also, I can use the foil block to bake the figures, if needed. Plastic seats are fine for fitting and checking your figures as you go along, but remember that any unbaked clay left on the plastic will eat into the plastic eventually, so be sure to clean the plastic after each figure is done.



You must be getting pretty good doing foil armatures by this point, so do another one! This first figure for the car will be seated on the open end of the bench away from the wall. Here I've bent the armature to fit the basic bench height.

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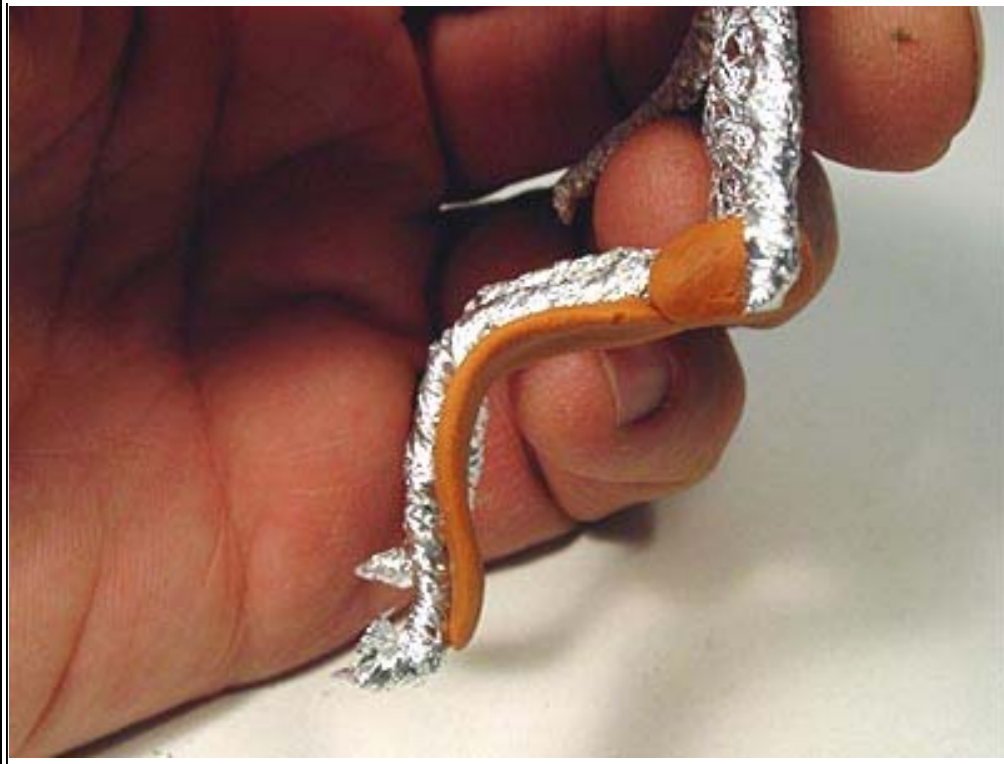
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Next I set the armature on the foil box just to check it. I check seated figures a lot.



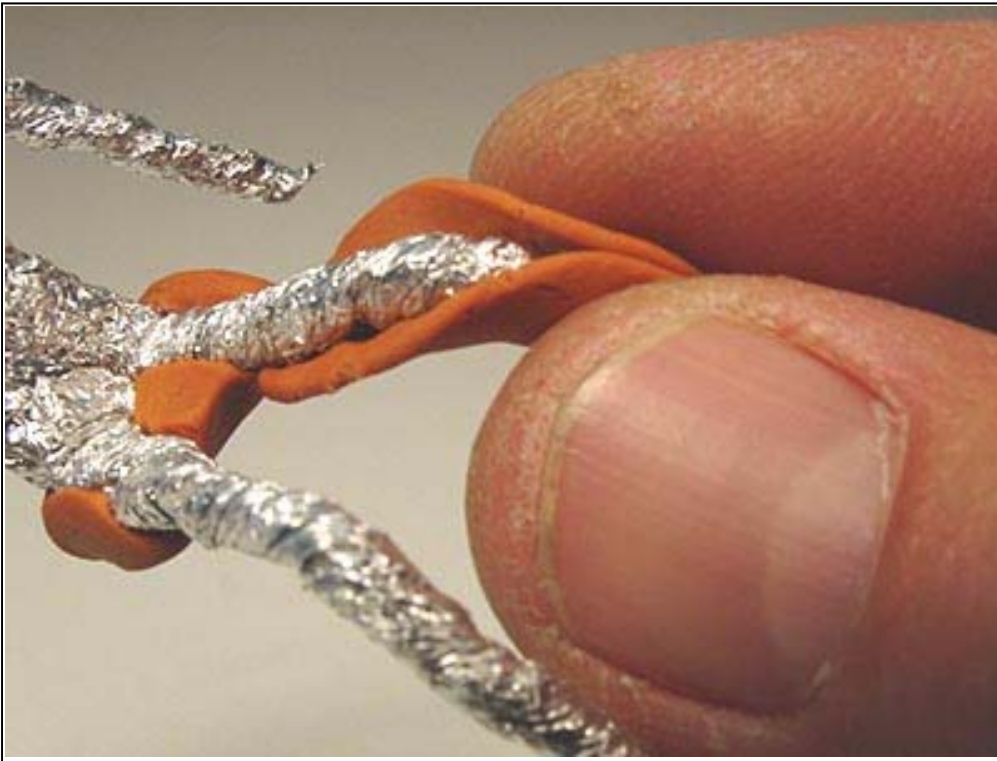
Now add the first layer of polyclay as we've been doing all along. I put a blob of clay for the rear end so that there's enough mass there to form a solid, stable base for the figure. Then I form a blob of clay into a long "pancake" shape to apply to the leg.



I'm adding the clay in flat "pancakes" instead of just blobs so that I can have a better idea of how even the clay is on the areas that will become contact points.

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It's simple enough to just wrap the pancake forward to cover the rest of the leg.



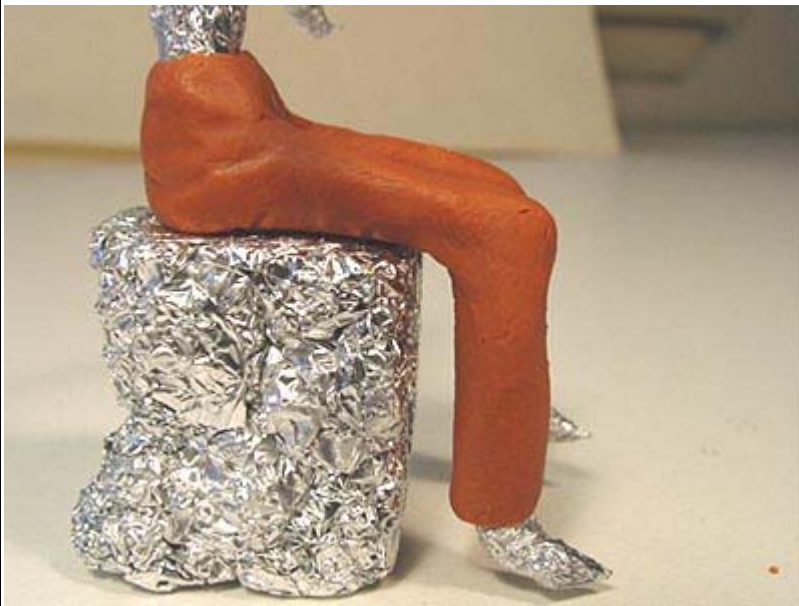
The same for the other leg. The important thing here is to try and keep the thickness of the clay even over the legs.

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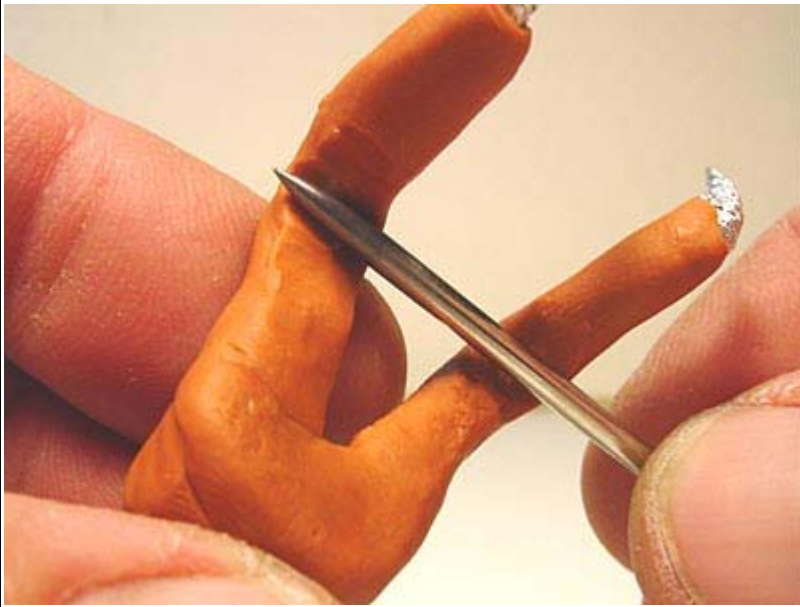


Smooth it all out and make sure the clay covers the armature from the ankles to the waist.

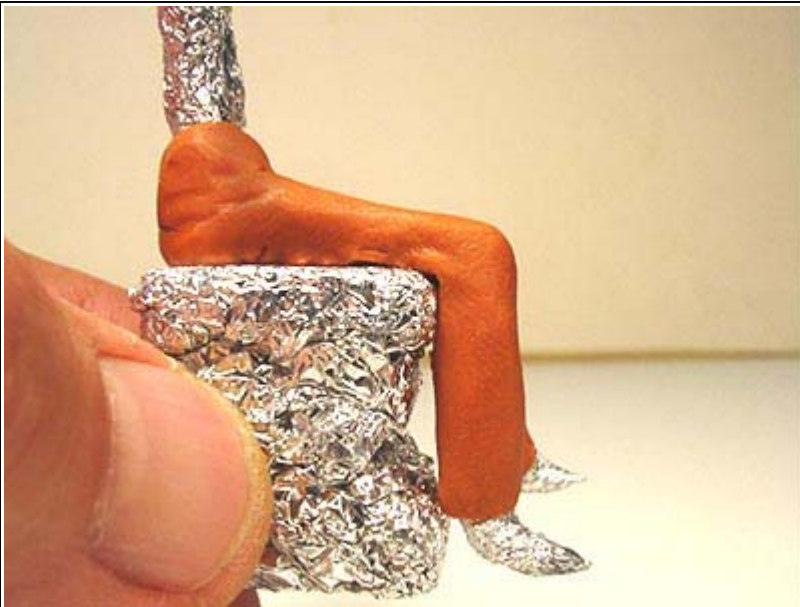


Now, sit the armature on the foil box. How does it look? This is a very important step because it establishes the basic relationship between the figure and the seat. It'll be hard to fix it if this isn't done right here, or worse, if we change this relationship along the way. This one looks OK, but just OK. We can do a little better. The backs of the knees are too rounded and the thighs are a little rounded. It looks fine here, but if we tried to move the figure back on the seat, the feet would be lifted up by the thickness of the knees. You'll also notice that the "feet" aren't touching the ground...yet. They're close enough for this stage. We're really concerned about the rear end here. (stop snickering.)

Using my metal toothpick, I press in the backs of the knees. I'm doing both at once so that they measure out evenly, that is, so that the backs of the knees are the same distance from the back of the figure. I roll the tool along the bottom of the thighs to even them out.



It's important to keep the area of the thighs that may sit on the seat nice and flat.



There, that's a bit better. The figure can sit fully back and the legs are nice and flat on the bottom of the thighs, making them look like they're resting on the surface of the seat. But I wasn't paying attention when I made the car itself and I wound up making this bench a little too tall. So...

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even with the change in the pose, this one will still sit back on the bench, so I'll have that option.



With the "base" of the figure done, I'll start to work my way up the figure. This is helpful when doing sitting figures to make sure that the correct points of connection are in place before doing the main body of the figure. Here I've turned the torso at the waist for a more natural pose as well as positioned the right arm. The left arm will go on the left knee so I can't position it until that knee is done; so for now I'm leaving it alone and bending it out of the way.

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I'll reposition the armature to make the pose more interesting and functional. By bringing the figure out away from the seat, I can take advantage of the entire length of the leg. When a figure is sitting back into a seat, the upper legs have no downward mobility. By sitting the figure forward, I can bend the leg more, set them at different heights and hide the fact that the darn seat should be lower! It's a more natural pose, particularly on an excursion where people would be expected to be looking and turning this way and that.



Once the pose is set and defines the relationship between the rear end and both feet, it's time to bake! These figures are being done in two separate locations because I'm working on them as I bounce back and forth between two cities. In Lovely Burbank I use a toaster oven to bake figures. Here's this one going in right next to that IMPORTANT THING....the oven thermometer!

Once it's out of the oven and cool, check the fit of the figure so far. I've found that

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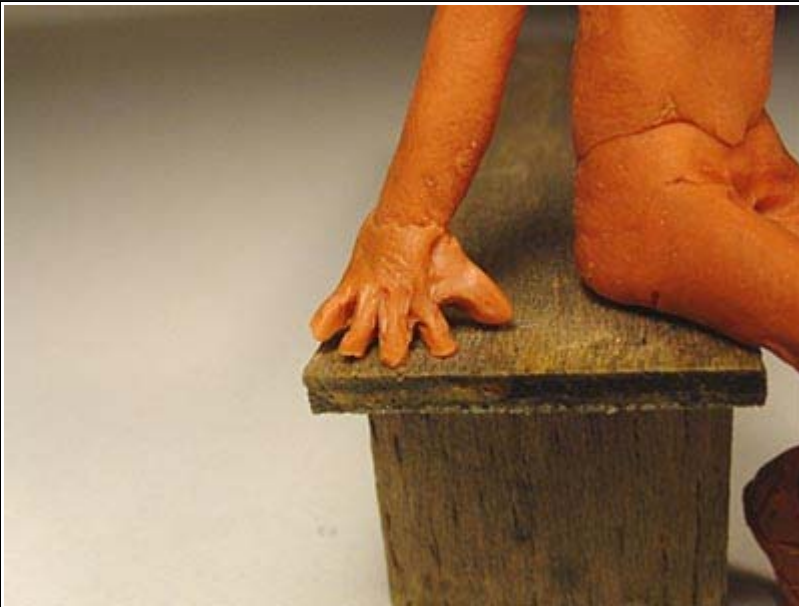
Now I've covered the torso and right arm with a first layer. This will define all four points of connection for this figure; the two feet, the rear end and the right arm.



After this stage is baked, check the fit again! These figures can have a tendency to distort slightly during baking , so it's important to check continually.



Now I'll do the feet and hand that connect, or actually touch the floor or bench. Each one starts with a blob of clay. You'll notice that once the basic connection points are baked and hard, I use the real wood bench as much as possible to guarantee a good fit.



You can do the hands any way that works for you. Here I've cut the individual fingers so that I can spread them out. This guy will be on the more visible end of the bench, so I'll put a little more effort into him!

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I've just done some quick line work on the feet to suggest shoes. Nothing fancy. Bake this stage, because the next step takes more handling of the figure.



Now I start building up the finish layer of the legs. Pay attention here. The clay goes on top of the thigh and around the sides. NOT on the bottom. If you add clay to the bottom of the thighs or posterior, you change the entire relationship of the figure to the seat!



Here's what the upper leg looks like from the top....



And here's what it looks like from underneath. The surface of the leg that comes in contact with the bench is left untouched. Got that?

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Now do the other upper leg and both lower legs, making sure to keep any connecting area clear.



Now add whatever folds, creases, pockets, etc, that you want. Brush out with alcohol and bake!



Here's how our seated figure looks at his point. It's a nice, stable, fitted start. All the fitting concerns are dealt with. The rest of the figure doesn't touch anything else (except the left arm) so the rest of this figure is a repeat of what we've been doing with our standing figures.

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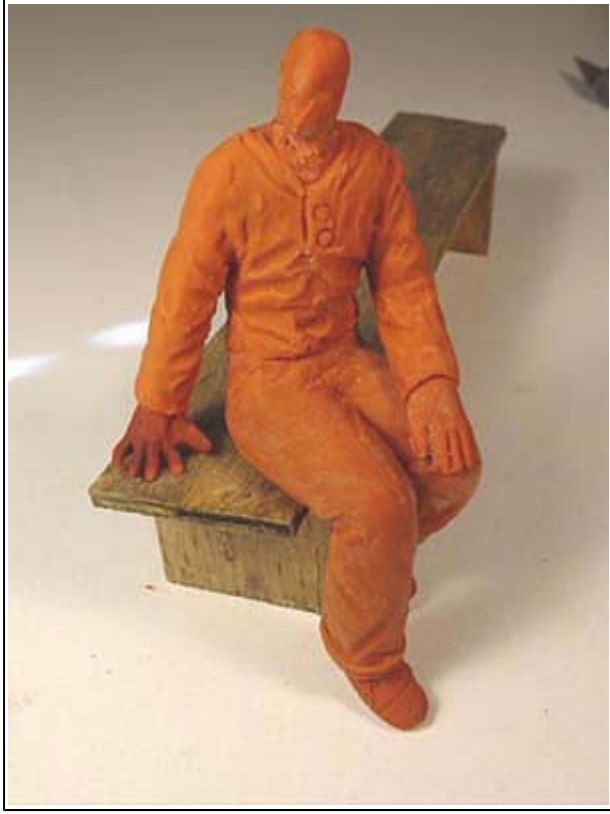
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The shoulders, head and left arm get the first layer and the left hand is done. I've turned his head so that he'll be looking straight out the back of the car, giving his head an almost ninety degree turn from the waist.



In this step, I did the finish layer for the upper torso, except the head itself. I brushed this out and baked.



Taking a look at him after he's baked and sitting in place, he looks natural and relaxed in position.

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I've done his head and hat in one step (I'm rushed for time these days!). He's become a prospector who's taking a break from the mine to clear his lungs and see the countryside. Sculpturally, he's done. But one figure does not a carload make...



I've decided to put six figures total in this car, so this is a good opportunity to do five figures at the same time! First, I position the foil armatures roughly in place to get an idea of where they can fit. These five figures will be done more like the standing figures. I'll put a first layer on all the armatures, then fit them to the bench; sort of the opposite of the first sitting figure. Both methods work as long as you stay aware of the contact points.

Now that we've learned



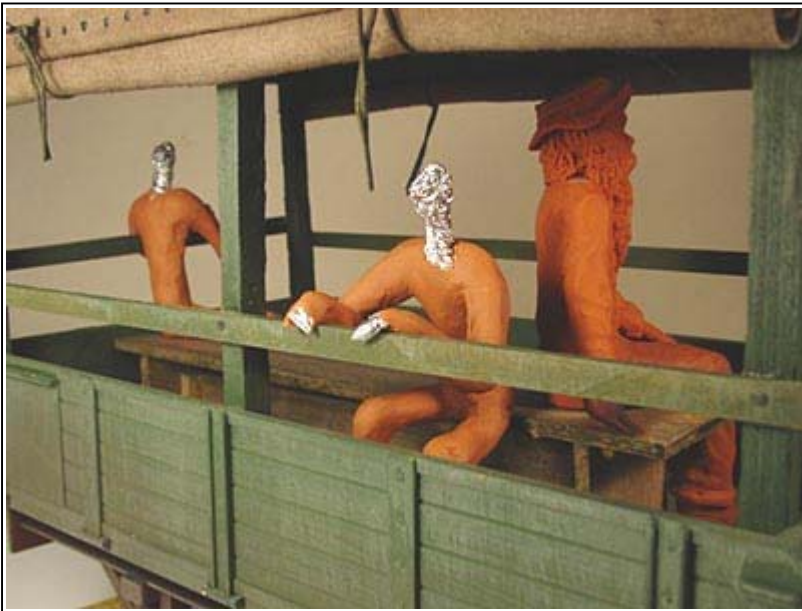
the basic considerations for sitting figures, we can be more adventurous! I've put the first layer of clay on all five armatures. Here it's easy to see how quickly those thin armatures will fill out the bench when they become figures.

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I've already done the figure for one end of the bench and to make sure of the space I'll have to do the others, I'll work on the figure at the opposite end next. This way I know how much area there is in between the end figures. This guy will be hanging on the rail, looking at people in the next car. (Note to Chris; put a pretty girl in the next car). This guy now has six points of contact; two feet, two hands, posterior and underarm. A little trickier than the first guy, but maybe more interesting because of it.



How about a guy leaning forward holding on to the rail? He must see something interesting. Note that I've had to move him to the edge of his seat to get his hands over the rail. Let's call him Looker.



On every sightseeing tour, there's always someone who couldn't care less about the scenery. We'll call this guy Boozer, as he's going to be taking a swig from a bottle.

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I check on Boozer to make sure that his guzzling will be low enough to be seen when he's in place. Oh, yeah, it shows! Boozer is a floater in that he can be moved forward or back on the bench to adjust for any other figures placement.



Ah, here's Mr. Otter, the quiet merchant. Hmm, he's not as rotund as I'd like him....



I add a blob of clay and then take a bunch of armature cut-offs and stick them in place to help fill him out. Using the foil is good for two reasons; (1) it uses less polyclay and (2) it helps to prevent cracking in the baking stage by keeping the clay from getting too thick in one layer. Speaking of layers, I think Mr. Otter needs another...

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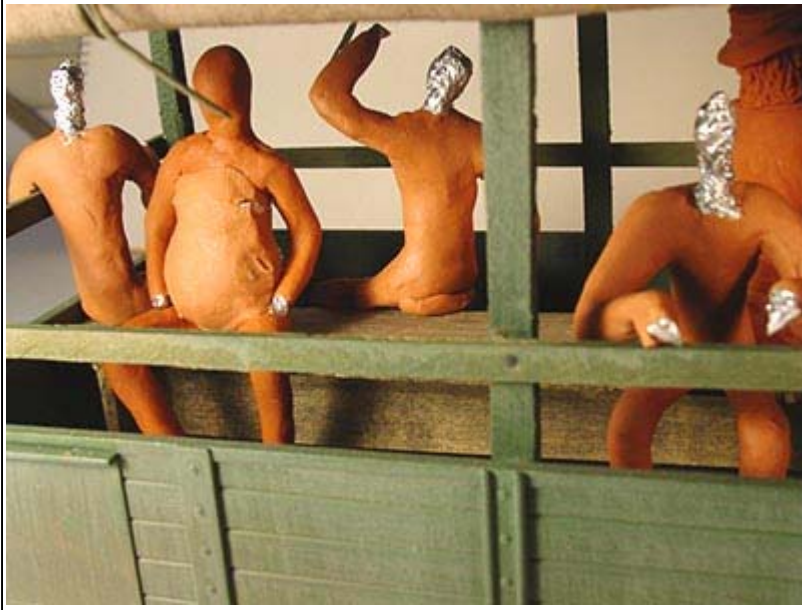
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That's getting it. I'm not baking out each layer of the foil/clay because the foil will take up the slack in any expansion/contraction during baking. On larger sculptures, though, I would bake each layer.



A final layer of clay and he looks like he's about the right mass. Time to position him!



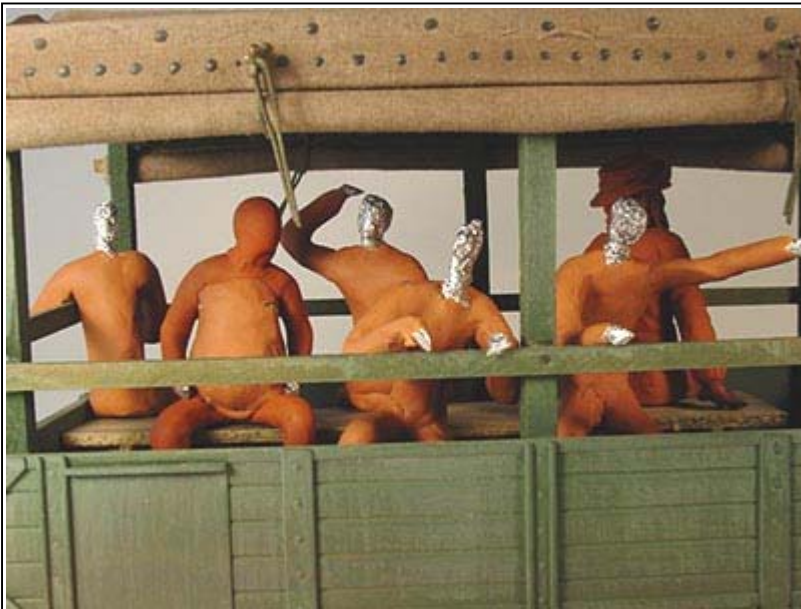
Mr. Otter is the meekest of the bunch and I'm going to point that out by giving him a reserved pose while the rest of the guys in the car will be more relaxed or active

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Last man on the car will be Pointer. He sees something fantastic and has to point it out to others. He's positioned literally on the edge of his seat with excitement.



Here then are the six figures as they will be seated in the finished car. (Looker is tipped over a little). What I want to work toward is an interaction between the three guys on this side of the car. Pointer points excitedly while Looker scans to see what he's pointing at. And quiet Mr. Otter will be sneaking a look to see what it's all about.

Here's the other side of the car. Boozer looks like he's being snubbed by the other guys. There's probably enough



room on this side for another figure, but I'll wait until I get these guys done to see for sure.



Here's what the bunch looks like from overhead. You can see that there's still room in between them all, more on one side than the other. But I'm happy with the basic layout of the figures, so they get baked!

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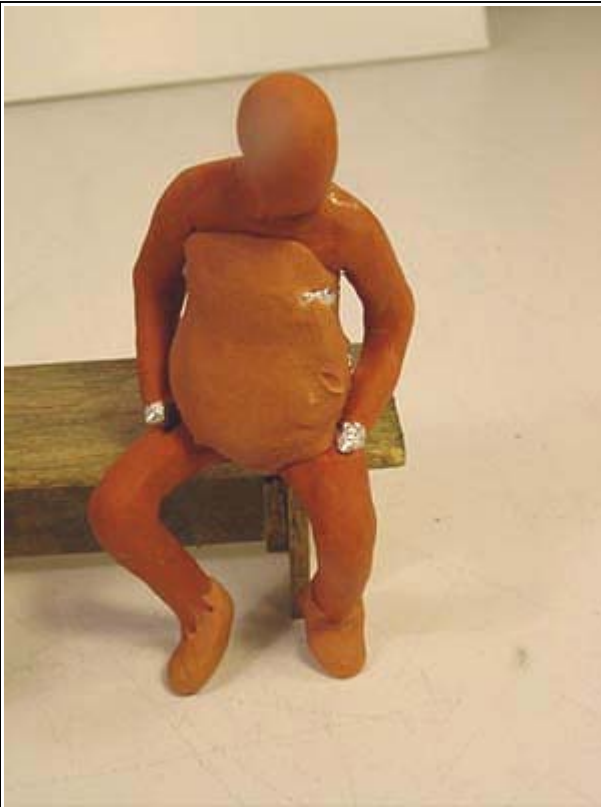
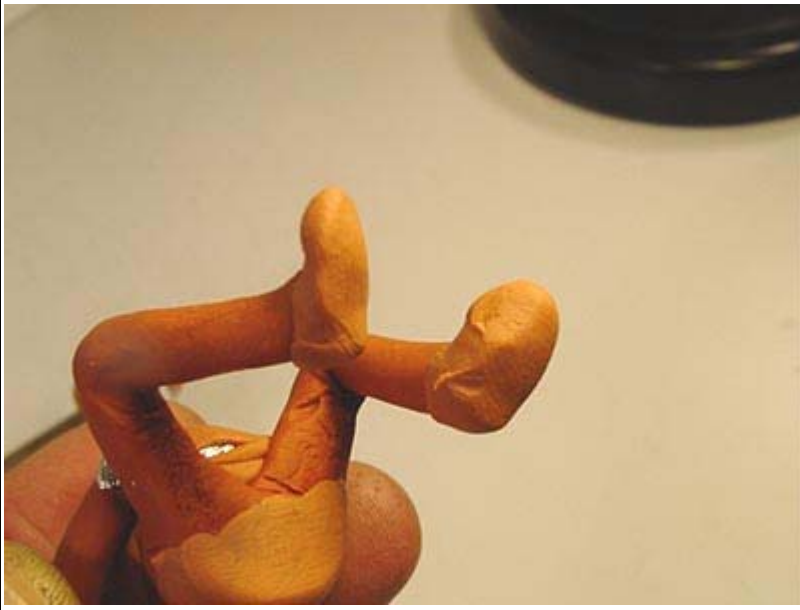


Now that the basic poses are locked, it's time to lock the relationship to the bench. This is easily done by adding a lump of clay for the rear end. Don't try to form a flat "sitting" bottom. This is Mr. Otter, by the way.



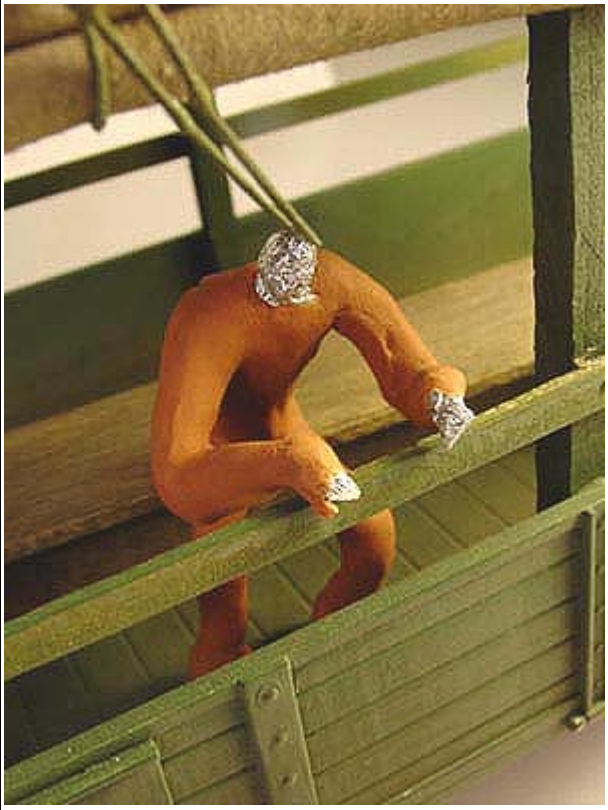
Now wet the rear end with water and gently press the figure down into position. This will give you the matching surface the figure needs to fit the seat. It should look like this.

Now add feet.



Check the fit of the figure. Does it sit solidly without rocking or tipping one way or another? The figure should sit just the way you want it at this stage. Bake.

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Here's looker. Like the previous figure, it's important to make sure that the hands are where they need to be when you do the "bottom match" as this step locks in the hand spacing as well.

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